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Author(s): Frits Noske

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SOCIAL TENSIONS IN 'LE NOZZE DI FIGARO'

BY FRITS NOSKE

In the older operas a character such as Count Almaviva would have been presented with the main emphasis on his rank, and the personality of the character would have been a secondary consideration. Consequently his amorous affairs would appear as a cavalier's sport. Mozart's Count, however, is primarily moved by sensual passion which is constantly at odds with his awareness of himself. His aristocratic rank is of consequence only in so far as it represents the external expression of this awareness, the insistence on the ancient rights of the upper classes. In short, the primary factors are human, not social. Because of this, Mozart pays almost no attention to external trappings or surroundings. What intrigues him is the personality *per se* of the human being, not the external circumstances and relationships which produced it.

The above paragraph is quoted from Hermann Abert's monumental Mozart biography which appeared shortly after the First World War.¹ Today not everyone is ready to accept the image of Mozart as a man lacking interest in social matters; nevertheless the concept may be found in several recent studies.² A curious way of thinking underlies this opinion. Briefly it amounts to this: Mozart was not interested in politics but in human beings; since lack of interest in political affairs necessarily implies indifference to social questions, there can be no affinity between his operatic characters and contemporary society. This way of reasoning, already far from logical in itself, becomes completely incomprehensible if we think of Mozart's letters, which unequivocally indicate his lively interest in the social conditions of his time. Thus Abert and several biographers after him involuntarily created a dualistic image: a man who was an 'engaged' correspondent and at the same time a 'transcendent' composer. It is significant, however, that this artificial conception was not consistently elaborated. Generally the 'romantic' image of the timeless genius overshadows that of the historically conditioned man. Mozart belongs to all ages, and therefore not to his own.

Among post-war writings, which give a more modern view, is a little study on 'Le nozze di Figaro' by Gunter Reiss; it elucidates the dramatic 'themes' of the opera by drawing attention to the conflicts between old and new tendencies in eighteenth-century

¹ 'W. A. Mozart', ii (Leipzig, 1921), p. 12. I am indebted to Dr. Frederick Sternfeld for the translation of this passage.

² See for instance J.-V. Hocquard, 'La Pensée de Mozart' (Paris, 1958), pp. 377-8, and D. J. Grout, 'A Short History of Opera', 2nd ed. (New York, 1965), p. 283.

society.⁸ Reiss bases his research principally on the libretto, in which the composer undoubtedly will have had his say. In the present article the stress lies on the score. Mozart gave each of the characters a specific musical configuration, which remains recognizable during the whole drama. These sonorous individualities reveal themselves most clearly in their emotional response to the dramatic action. Our task is to discover whether latent social tensions do motivate these responses and determine their musical expression. Since social tensions cannot arise except in a community, the fundamental question is: what relationship exists among the characters of 'Le nozze di Figaro'?

The Family

The cast consists of eleven actors, four female and seven male. Their respective social positions at the beginning of the day cannot be determined with absolute certainty, but a rough division into three groups is possible with the aid of data provided by Beaumarchais' comedies and Pietro Sellini's libretto of 'Il barbiere di Siviglia'. The lowest social stratum is formed by the gardener Antonio, his daughter Barbarina and his niece Susanna. Figaro and Marcellina also belong to this group, although the former as an ex-barber might perhaps claim a slightly higher step on the social ladder. The middle class is represented by Bartolo, Basilio and Curzio. The latter two are called Don, by Sellini and Da Ponte respectively. This is not necessarily significant, because this title, which originally indicated noble birth, had gradually lost its standing in the course of time. In any case all three are professional men and therefore belong to a higher class than the servants. The Count, Countess and Cherubino form the upper-class group. Although little is known about the page's social background, the fact that he is sent to serve as an officer in the Count's regiment at Seville strongly points to his being high-born. It should be noted that on the strength of his youth Cherubino can permit himself more social liberty than the Count and the Countess. The same holds for Barbarina in the lowest group.

All the actors except one play a vital part in the drama. The exception is Don Curzio, who, as a character, is so little profiled that we have to recognize him by an external feature (he stammers in the recitatives). The question of why Da Ponte and Mozart should have reduced Beaumarchais' judge (Don Guzman) and clerk (Doublemain) to this meagre part has already occupied many a critic. It is generally assumed that the shortening of the French model was caused either by fear of the imperial censor or by the excessively long duration of the opera. Neither of these interpretations seems implausible, but they do not explain why it was precisely the most

⁸ G. Reiss, 'Die Thematik der Komödie in *Le Nozze di Figaro*', *Mozart-Jahrbuch* 1965-6, pp. 164-78.

brilliant scene of Beaumarchais' comedy that fell victim to the curtailment. This scene would certainly have offered Mozart a splendid opportunity for writing a lively *buffo* ensemble. As for the censor, Da Ponte had no difficulty elsewhere in the libretto in allaying the suspicions of the imperial magistrate. It seems to me that a particular motive must have outweighed all others: Don Curzio does not belong to the 'family'.

Actually the quotation marks are superfluous. In English society about 1700 the concept of a family still embraced the whole patriarchally ruled household including not only grandparents, nephews, nieces, etc., but also all kinds of servants and other subordinates.⁴ There can be little doubt that in the second half of the eighteenth century this situation was virtually unchanged in less progressive regions of Europe, such as the Iberian peninsula. The libretto of 'Le nozze di Figaro' offers ample evidence for this. Figaro and Susanna are not allowed to marry without the Count's permission, and the latter has sufficient control over the organist Basilio to send him to Seville on an errand. Indeed Bartolo, Basilio and Marcellina are related to the Count's household by their antecedents. Only Don Curzio, as an independent judge, does not form a part of the family and therefore he plays but an insignificant role in the complex of intrigues. Thus the action is limited to the smallest social entity: the family. The essential difference with the family concept of our day is not the Count's unbounded authority, but the social heterogeneity of the group. It is this circumstance which strongly provokes tensions and conflicts.

How does the individual react to these tensions? Generally speaking, there are two courses open to him. Either he puts up with the actual situation, whether resigned or not, or he tries to break the bonds of his caste. Analysis of the social aspects of 'Le nozze di Figaro' leads to the remarkable conclusion that all men choose the first course and all women the second.⁵ Each of the characters has a different motive for his conduct, which will be examined further on. The reason why the women's reactions are diametrically opposed to those of the men must first be explored.

The following offers an explanation. The external attitude to life during the second half of the eighteenth century has, in so far as the upper classes are concerned, an undeniably feminine colour. This is revealed in many social forms of expression, such as fashion, hair-dress, dislike of beard growth, furniture, tone of conversation and epistolary style. In the minuet, perhaps the most refined dance of

⁴ See Ian Watt, 'The Rise of the Novel' (London, 1966), p. 145. The author refers to Gregory King, 'Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions upon the State and Condition of England' (London, 1696).

⁵ Admittedly Figaro attempts to revolt in his cavatina, but this is due to his underestimating the situation. He soon finds out that he has no chance whatever. Socially he remains immobile, even when in the fourth act he is convinced that, in spite of their marriage, Susanna will not be secure from the Count.

Western culture, the lady is the central figure. Moreover, in contrast to the seventeenth-century leaning toward systematic reasoning, the eighteenth-century empirical way of thinking offers opportunities to the female for participation in intellectual life. Provided with a basic knowledge about various topics and a fair amount of common sense, she may go far. In this spiritual climate an intelligent female servant will not have too much difficulty in bridging, at least externally, the distance from her mistress. She daily observes the manners of the higher classes and soon succeeds in imitating them. This is something in which the male servant would fail. For him the feminine tone of high society forms an insurmountable barrier. It is anything but fortuitous that Susanna's aria 'Al desio' (K.577), which replaced 'Deh vieni' in the Vienna performances of 1789, was considered for a long time to have been written for the Countess. In fact, there is, musically speaking, hardly any class difference between the Countess and Susanna. One forgets that Susanna is but the niece of a plain gardener in the third-act letter scene, and the same holds for her duet with the Count. A scene similar to the latter is simply unthinkable between Figaro and the Countess. The servant's courtship would turn into a parody, like the one in the B♭ section of the last finale.

The women's social mobility and the men's inertia or frustration confer on the drama a special dimension. This is principally Mozart's achievement, since the social tensions are expressed with purely musical means. It is Da Ponte's merit to have provided the composer with the opportunity.

The Individual Characters

We may now look at the actors separately and in their relation to each other. If we compare their individual reactions to analogous situations, we find considerable differences. The obvious explanation for this is the diversity of personalities. Basilio reacts differently from Antonio, and Figaro from Susanna, simply because each of them is an individual human being. But in an opera like 'Le nozze di Figaro' such an explanation does not suffice. Since all the characters are 'normal' people—we do not encounter any exceptional figure like Don Giovanni or Donna Elvira—the motives for their emotional responses cannot be explained exclusively by their individuality. There are obvious external influences at work and because we are dealing with a social comedy we shall have to look for these in the social atmosphere.

The Count. All too often he is presented on the stage in an unsatisfying manner. We see a stupid, hot-tempered man who on the one hand is not funny enough to play a *buffo* part, and on the other lacks sufficient dignity and *allure* to pass for a paterfamilias. In such an interpretation his third-act aria will never be convincing to the audience. And it is precisely this aria which expresses the essence of

his role: his personal tragedy. The Count is the victim of fate, which forces him to embody a feudal as well as an enlightened ruler. During the whole day he is tormented with the incompatibility of these two conceptions, and the aria 'Vedrò mentr'io' is nothing else than the expression of his impotent anger against fate. Mozart pictures him as a lion jumping desperately against the bars of his cage:



If we discern this as the Count's essential conflict, then there will no longer be a need to depict him as a savage oppressor or an erotomaniac. During one of the rare episodes when he feels detached he almost appears good-natured. This occurs in the scene of the second-act finale, where he calls Figaro to account for the letter denouncing the Countess's rendezvous (according to his promise given earlier in the finale we know already that Figaro will not be punished):

No. 15 (Count)
Andante

Co - no - sce - te, si - gnor Fi - ga - ro, que - sto fo - gli - o chi ver - gò?

With this Haydn-like melody the master mockingly speaks his servant's language, reinforcing the irony of the title *signor*.⁶ Here he is the feudal ruler who can afford to reprove his subordinate in a rather mild way. Unconscious of what there is still in store for him, he thinks he has reached his goal. Marcellina may arrive at any moment to claim Figaro as her *promesso sposo*, removing every obstacle to his affair with Susanna. It probably does not occur to him that he will destroy the happiness of two people, and therefore there is no question of real malignity. For him, as for others of his rank, a man like Figaro does not exist as a person but only as a servant. The same holds for his relationship to Susanna. It is not so much erotic passion which carries him to the lady's maid as the urge to convince himself of his unlimited feudal power. The third-act duet seems to contradict this explanation. There he looks across the boundaries of his social domain and recognizes Susanna as a human being. His words, although derived from the conventional amorous vocabulary,

⁶ The occurrence of the same passage (including the bass) in the Vienna duet of Leporello and Zerlina (K.540^b, bars 46–7 and 72–3) is evidence of the low-class character of the melody.

clearly spring from his heart. However this human tone during the encounter with Susanna is an exception to the rule. When, in the fourth-act finale, he believes the difficulties have vanished, he is once more in his usual attitude. Susanna is merely the object of a frivolous affair. The affinity of his courting theme with the light-hearted melody through which the ladies of 'Così fan tutte' are supposed to be seduced is striking. Even the key is the same, a particularity rarely without meaning in Mozart:

No. 28 (Count)
[Andante con moto]

'Così fan tutte', No. 15 (Guglielmo)
Andante

Here we see the Count in his true colours: a feudal nobleman parading with enlightened ideas which cover his frivolities.

The Countess. Opposed to the tragic role of the Count is the dramatic part of his spouse. This is all the more remarkable since she is predestined, by her sex and high position, to a passive attitude. Indeed, her first appearance seems to confirm this outlook. The cavatina in E \flat is actually nothing but the traditional *lamento* of the *sposa abbandonata*. Its text contains the standard formulae of such a piece ("O rendi il mio tesoro; o mi lascia almen morir"). But the following scenes show the Countess from a less conventional side. She is not insensible to Cherubino's charm, and the accusations of her husband provoke a resistance which is stimulated by Susanna. Like the Count, she is powerless within the frame of her social position but, in contrast to him, she decides to exceed its bounds, and this is possible in only one direction: downward. It is a decision which cannot be taken without inner struggle, and this is Mozart's reason for writing an aria with psychological action ("Dove sono i bei momenti"). Its preceding *recitativo accompagnato* shows how much the Countess feels the intended *travesti* as a real humiliation. There is no question of the traditional light-hearted atmosphere of the *commedia dell'arte*, from which this dramatic device is originally derived. On the contrary, the complaint at the end of the recitative clearly expresses class consciousness:

No. 19 (Countess)

fam - mi or cer - cer da u - - na mia ser - va a - i - ta!

Almaviva, too, speaks in his aria about his *servo*, though in much cruder terms ("un vil ogetto"); this parallelism is symptomatic of the fixed social bond between Count and Countess.

Viewed in the light of the preceding recitative, the dramatic significance of 'Dove sono' has been curiously undervalued. Even

Dent and Newman consider the aria a set piece.⁷ Actually, what happens here is, socially speaking, the most sensational scene of the opera. A lady of high birth decides to conspire with her maid against her husband, not as a frivolous pastime but in order to restore her domestic happiness. The consequences of this brave decision appear in the letter duet. The metre is the 'low' 6/8 and the lady has the same melodic material as the servant. True, Susanna meets the Countess halfway, but the eighteenth-century public must nevertheless have strongly felt the self-humiliation of the mistress, since it had a basic awareness of her high, inviolable position. Today we are struck primarily by the spiritual *noblesse* and not by the dramatic conflict between class and humanity. For contemporaries, however, Rosina was first of all a countess and therefore classified *a priori*. Apart from this, Mozart conferred on her a high moral character and expressed her courage in such a convincing way that her violation of social convention became acceptable.

Susanna. Her leading role during the whole day makes us easily forget that she belongs to the lowest class of the 'family'. Her social mobility is remarkably strong. In each situation and with each antagonist she strikes the right note. Hence she asserts herself pre-eminently in the duets and ensembles. When, finally, she sings her "Deh vieni, non tardar", we have already received the impression of a many-sided personality, and the simplicity of this aria is therefore deceiving. Here Susanna plays a part within a part. From the beginning her interests run concurrently with those of the Countess. She, too, crosses the borders of her social class, naturally in an upward direction. If the Countess's step requires moral courage, Susanna's calls for intelligence and charm, qualities which she possesses to a high degree. Although she could easily turn the Count around her little finger, she does not use her talents to further any social position, but exclusively to secure her marriage with Figaro. This modest purpose paradoxically contributes most to her superiority. Like the Countess, Susanna shows traits which are borrowed from Rousseau's sphere of thought. The Countess's *noblesse* of mind exceeds the nobility of her birth; Susanna possesses a singleness of heart to which her innate refinement and coquetry remain subordinated.

Figaro. His lack of success might lead to the conclusion that he is not the same man as the hero of 'Il barbiere di Siviglia'. Such an interpretation is hardly compatible with the popularity of Paisiello's opera, which shortly after its première (St. Petersburg, 1782) had been successfully performed in Vienna. Moreover, the two comedies of Beaumarchais must have been fairly well known in upper- and middle-class circles of Central Europe. Both plays were available in print, and the interdiction of their performance by the censor must

⁷ E. Newman, 'Mozart and Da Ponte', *Sunday Times*, 26 June 1939; E. J. Dent, 'Mozart's Operas', 2nd ed. (London, 1962), p. 143.

have stimulated their circulation. Mozart simply could not afford to create a different Figaro, and the idea probably never crossed his mind. A comparison of the scores of 'Figaro' and 'Il barbiere' shows his familiarity with Paisiello's *opera buffa*.⁸ The musical affinity between these fragments, for example, is striking:

Figaro (Mozart)
Allegretto

Figaro (Paisiello)
Andantino

'Le nozze di Figaro' contains several scenes in which the insolence of Paisiello's hero is easily recognized (e.g. the recitative preceding 'Non più andrai', where Cherubino is addressed with *tu* instead of *voi*; the 'military' aria itself; the dialogue with Antonio in the finale of the second act). If nevertheless Figaro gradually loses his grasp on events and, toward the end of the day, submerges into darkest pessimism, it is because in the present opera he faces situations which he cannot handle. 'Il barbiere' required cleverness, while 'Figaro' calls for insight. Figaro is undoubtedly clever, but his intelligence is too restricted to follow the subtle intrigues of the females. Moreover, his relation to the Count is quite different from what it was in the opera of Paisiello. There he was the ally and almost the companion of a young nobleman without responsibilities; here we find him as the lowly servant of a grandee of Spain.

Figaro is fully aware of the enormous social distance separating him from his master. Although at first he thinks he can manage the difficulties with his usual flair and impertinence ('Se vuol ballare, signor contino'), in the evening he has to admit that he has not the slightest chance against his high-born adversary ('Aprite un po' quegli occhi'). Hence the partiality of his diatribe, which only refers to the women: the Count is above the law. Figaro's frustration is clearly revealed in the first G major section of the last finale, where he witnesses the Count's rendezvous with the pseudo-Susanna. Hidden in the bushes, he repeatedly interrupts the couple with pent-up rage:

No. 28 (Figaro)

Che com-pia - cen - te fem - mi - na, che spo - sa di buon cor!

⁸ The two composers had met in Vienna (1784).

Finally, with courage born of despair, he disturbs the meeting, and only then does this motif develop into a complete melody.⁹ Figaro's inertia is diametrically opposed to Susanna's quick reactions in analogous situations. Twice in the course of the day she feels hurt by his supposed infidelity and both times he is promptly slapped (sextet and fourth-act finale). In the last act we see a bitter Figaro on the stage—a man who knows himself to be the victim of an unjust social system, to which, nevertheless, unconditionally he submits.

Antonio. The gardener's social immobility neither poses a problem to himself nor to us. What he wants is order, in his flower-beds as well as in the conduct of his daughter and niece. When this order is disturbed he becomes angry. For such a four-square character the Count is the symbol of all that is right; hence his scrupulous imitation of his master in the second-act finale (bars 472-3, 477-8, 524-8, 534-6). He is entirely devoid of imagination and his melodic range is very small. But he should not be shown as a stupid figure, since he repeatedly acts with common sense.¹⁰ Even worse is the presentation of a drunken Antonio. Although Figaro, pushed against the wall, does accuse the gardener of drunkenness, nothing in the libretto nor in Mozart's music corroborates this insinuation. Antonio may be a rude fellow, but as a social conformist he knows better than to appear before his master in a state of inebriation.

Basilio. He is not so much a conformist as an opportunist. Because of his profession—he is a musician and serves the Count as organist of his chapel—his social position is less strongly fixed than those of the other characters. His 'confession' ('In quegli anni') is the only piece in the opera for which librettist and composer were at a loss. Da Ponte uses many words and Mozart many instruments to picture Basilio, but nevertheless he remains rather lifeless in this monologue. His appearance in the chair trio of the first act is much more convincing:

No. 7 (Basilio)

Ah, del pag - gio quel che ho det - to, e - ra
so - lo un mio so - spet - to.

Toward the end of the trio Basilio resumes this musical phrase with exactly the same words but in a completely different situation (Cherubino has been discovered in the chair). First we hear cowardice, then malice. Mozart's device is more than an ingenious pun: it is the sharp characterization of an opportunist.

Bartolo. His aria ('La vendetta') is difficult to understand without

⁹ The passage has been analysed in detail by S. Levarie, 'Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*' (Chicago, 1952), pp. 222-4, and in my article 'Musical Quotation as a Dramatic Device', *Musical Quarterly*, liv (1968), pp. 191-3.

¹⁰ The same holds true for Masetto, who is often presented as a dullard.

previous knowledge. Obviously Mozart and Da Ponte assumed that Beaumarchais' 'Barbier de Séville' was known to the public. Although in 'Le nozze di Figaro' Bartolo is involved in the plot, he is dominated above all by his old grudge against Figaro. The reason for Bartolo's aggression does not seem to be sufficiently explained by the previous story, since at the time Bartolo aimed at Rosina's dowry rather than herself; and thanks to Almaviva's generosity he finally succeeded in obtaining this dowry. A stronger motive for his lasting enmity lies in the social atmosphere. In this connection the following phrase is significant:

No. 4 (Bartolo)

had ever dared to hope. Marcellina is a feminist from purely interested motives. With her, feminism overshadows motherhood: as a mother she is almost a caricature. When in the fourth act Figaro complains about Susanna's supposed infidelity, one would expect Marcellina to take her son's part; instead she sides with her daughter-in-law (sc. 4). Now, in the aria, Marcellina's character is rounded off. Like many sentimental persons, she is devoid of intense human feeling; fundamentally she is icy cold. Mozart renders this characteristic through coloratura interpolations in the regular phrases of the minuet tune (bars 8–11, 32–5) and the Allegro section (bars 68–73). The text contains no explanation of these interpolations: their function appears to be purely psychological.¹²

Marcellina's feminism differs essentially from Susanna's. What serves as a means for Figaro's bride is a purpose for Bartolo's former mistress. Susanna wants to marry the man of her choice; Marcellina aims at marriage with whomsoever. In her eyes matrimony is synonymous with social progress. She is ambitious, reads books and speaks a few words of French (in eighteenth-century society erudition was not considered unbecoming in a woman, at least not in the middle and upper classes). Susanna easily sees through Marcellina's display of superficial learning. "Che lingua" is her mocking comment on the words "[l']argent fait tout" (Act I, sc. 4), and after her duet with the spinster she exclaims: "Va là, vecchia pedante, dottoressa arrogante! Perchè hai letti due libri . . ." (*ibid.*, sc. 5).

Barbarina. The twelve-year old Anna Gottlieb, who acted the first Barbarina, was faced with a difficult task. The gardener's daughter is certainly no longer a child; she performs (as a character) the part of a child—when it suits her. Barbarina borrows her affectations and little tricks from her cousin, whom she must have closely observed. The cavatina 'L'ho perduta' is full of the half-tender, half-coquettish appoggiaturas which we frequently heard from Susanna. The whole piece is dominated by the semitones above and below the fifth. Naturally Barbarina lacks Susanna's variety of expression. This is clearly apparent from her restricted vocal range, which is exactly one octave, whereas Susanna has a compass of two octaves and a minor third. But the musical affinity in their response to difficult situations is conspicuous:

No. 7 (Susanna)
[Allegro assai]

No. 23 (Barbarina)
[Andante]

¹² The metaphor ("Il capro e la capretta"), borrowed from Ariosto's 'Orlando Furioso' (canto 5, stanza 1; see Dent, *op. cit.*, p. 110, n. 1), sounds like a parody of a

The first of these examples is taken from the chair scene, the second from Barbarina's cavatina. Melody, rhythm and words are almost the same, and both fragments are in F minor, a rather exceptional key. The variance in tempo is easily explained, if one compares the two situations: Barbarina is in trouble, Susanna in a crisis demanding immediate action. This difference also justifies the rise in the latter's melody; Barbarina's phrase, on the contrary, remains under the influence of the dominant.

Barbarina's social ambition is as yet concealed under the cover of her playfulness. Nevertheless she succeeds in checkmating the Count by reminding him, in the presence of the Countess, Cherubino, Susanna, Antonio and the peasant girls, of his promise to comply with her wish in exchange for a kiss (Act III, sc. 12). She then asks for nothing less than Cherubino to be her future husband; her social ambition seems to exceed that of everyone else. Naturally none of those present takes this claim as a serious one; it is simply ignored. But this does not alter the fact that many a designing woman could still learn something from this clever young person.

Cherubino. Unlike the other characters, the page does not take an active part in the intrigues. Instead he works for his own benefit. Like Barbarina, he makes ample use of the social freedom which is the privilege of his age. This might have been the reason why Kierkegaard pictured him as a Don Giovanni *in statu nascendi*.¹³ Kierkegaard's interpretation was the starting-signal for the tracing of other camouflaged Dons: Alfonso, Papageno, and even Mozart himself. The latest addition to the list, offered by Brigid Brophy, is the Count:

It is not Cherubino who is Don Giovanni *in potentia* but Count Almaviva. There was needed only one impetus to develop Mozart's conception of this insolent aristocrat, who would like to take advantage of the *droit de seigneur* in order to seduce Susanna, into the insolent privateer who would like to seduce every woman he sets eyes on. And in point of fact . . . it is possible to be exact about what the impetus was: the death of Mozart's father, which took place between the composition of the two operas.¹⁴

The reconciliation scene of the Count and the Countess already contradicts Miss Brophy's interpretation.¹⁵ We have seen that the Count's craving for amorous affairs is in large part motivated by his efforts to maintain the way of living of his feudal ancestors. His class consciousness is quite opposite to Don Giovanni's avowed denial of social order. In a few years Cherubino, too, will respect

Metastasian text. But in spite of the coloratura the music has little affinity with *opera seria*. If Da Ponte aimed at a parodistic image of Marcellina, Mozart did not follow his intention.

¹³ S. Kierkegaard, 'Enten-Eller' ('Either/Or'), first part (1843). See 'Complete Works', vol. i (Copenhagen, 1901), pp. 57-60 and 81.

¹⁴ 'Mozart the Dramatist' (London, 1964), p. 109.

¹⁵ See J. Kerman, 'Opera as Drama' (New York, 1959), pp. 107-8. Another essential difference between Count Almaviva and Don Giovanni is the latter's flexibility (e.g. in the first-act quartet and in his dealings with Zerlina and Masetto).

the conventions of his class. The last part of Beaumarchais' trilogy clearly testifies to this.¹⁶

But Mozart does not stress so much Cherubino's social liberties as his passive function in the drama. Through his unappeasable appetite the page confuses the Count as well as the Countess and Susanna. In his way he imitates his master's game; and because Almoviva recognizes himself in the young man's behaviour, he is almost powerless to punish him efficiently. Both women are not unaware of their weakness with regard to the charming boy, and Barbarina, too, is clearly under his spell. This, perhaps, explains the affinities between the following fragments, in which the Countess, Cherubino, Susanna and Barbarina are more or less concerned:

No. 11 (Cherubino)

No. 21 (Peasant girls including Barbarina and Cherubino *in travesti*)

No. 23 (Barbarina)

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The first staff is for No. 11 (Cherubino) in G minor, featuring a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff is for No. 21 (Peasant girls including Barbarina and Cherubino in travesti) in G major, showing a simpler melodic line. The third staff is for No. 23 (Barbarina) in G minor, with a melodic line similar to No. 11. Vertical dashed lines connect the staves to their respective labels.

Thus Cherubino's function is of an indirect, rather than a direct order. Unintentionally he confronts the other characters with the consequences of their conduct. The page represents their social conscience.

The Minuet as Social Indicator

The opera contains five fragments which, for the sake of convenience, I shall refer to as minuets, although actually they are but minuet-like pieces. The only real dance is the *fandango* in the finale of the third act. The question arises: are these 'dance' sections related to the social climate and, if so, in what way?

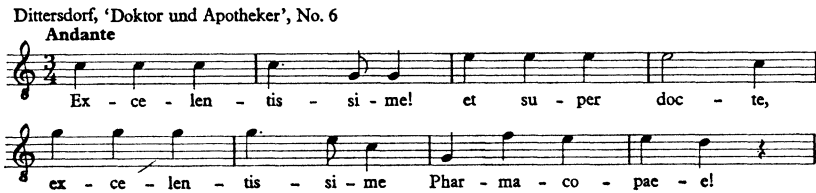
During the last three decades of the eighteenth century the minuet gradually loses its significance as a specifically aristocratic dance. It shifts to the middle class, but even there it cannot hold its own against the fashionable country dances and the German 'waltz' (the so-called *Allemande* or *Deutsche*). The social displacement of the minuet affected its musical style. This is clearly apparent in *opera buffa* and *Singspiel*, where it was maintained, either as a dance on the stage or as a purely musical form applied to arias and ensembles. Here two types may be distinguished: the aristocratic and the bourgeois. The former was usually written in a somewhat archaic style, i.e. in a slow tempo (*Larghetto*; *Andante*; *Andantino*) and

¹⁶ In 'L'Autre Tartuffe ou La Mère coupable' (1789-90) we are told that the Countess has given birth to an illegitimate child after having been seduced by Léon d'Astorga (Cherubino's real name). Nevertheless she cuts loose from her lover, who, in accordance with the code of honour, seeks and finds his death on the battlefield.

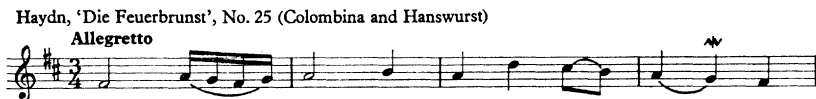
often without initial upbeat. Its most characteristic feature is, however, the absence of melodic movement in the first bar, where, as in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *canzona*, only the rhythm is presented. The classical example of the aristocratic minuet is to be found in the first finale of 'Don Giovanni', where it is danced by the upper-class couple, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio:



The aristocratic minuet could also be used by the lower classes, for instance as a sincere or ironic expression of reverence:



The bourgeois minuet was influenced by symphonic and chamber music of the time. Its tempo is considerably faster (Andantino *grazioso*; Allegretto; Tempo di menuetto) and it starts with a real melody, either with or without an upbeat. This type served to underline the middle-class character of a person or group of persons:



Naturally there are borderline cases, and one finds also numerous instances of minuets which defy sociological interpretation. In broad outline, however, the distinction of two types answers to the practice of late eighteenth-century opera.

Three of the minuets which occur in 'Le nozze di Figaro' belong to the aristocratic type. One would expect Mozart to assign these to the Count or the Countess, as a musical expression of their high rank. But this is not the case. Two are sung by Figaro and one by Susanna. In this way the aristocratic minuet clearly assumes the function of a social weapon.

Figaro starts and concludes his cavatina with a minuet tune, illustrating the metaphor in the text ("Se vuol ballare, signor contino"). The rather quick tempo (Allegretto) derives from his emotional state: Figaro is much more uneasy than he himself realizes. Susanna uses the minuet in a still sharper way. When she appears on the threshold of the closet, instead of Cherubino, she mocks the Count by using his 'own' dance:

No. 15 (Susanna)

Molto Andante

Musical score for No. 15 (Susanna), *Molto Andante*. The score is in 3/8 time and B-flat major. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has two systems of music with lyrics: "Si - gno - re," and "cos' è quel stu - po - re?". The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note pattern in the right hand and a more complex rhythmic pattern in the left hand.

The last minuet in the score—hitherto not identified as such—is Figaro's short monologue in the finale of the fourth act (bars 109–21).¹⁷ Here the dance is not used as a weapon but as an expression of bitterness (Figaro thinks himself defeated):

No. 28 (Figaro)

Larghetto

Musical score for No. 28 (Figaro), *Larghetto*. The score is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has two systems of music with lyrics: "Tut - to è tran-qui-lo e" and "pla - ci-do; en - trò la bel-la Ve - ne-re;". The piano accompaniment features a prominent triplet pattern in the right hand and a steady eighth-note pattern in the left hand.

Characteristic of Figaro's frustration is the irregular structure (the fourth bar is a contraction of two bars). The text illustrates the quasi-aristocratic atmosphere of the piece. The servant makes use of an image of classical mythology—Venus and Mars caught in Vulcan's net:

¹⁷ One reason why the minuet character of this piece has been overlooked may be a misinterpretation of its tempo (*Larghetto*). In the eighteenth century *Larghetto* was quite different from *Largo*. In fact the term indicated a tempo faster than *Adagio*. Another possible reason is the predominance of the left-hand triplets in the vocal score. Actually they belong to the inner voices and are played by the violins.

Tutto è tranquillo e placido;
 Entrò la bella Venere,
 Col vago Marte prendere
 Nuovo Vulcan del secolo,
 In rete li potrò!

Abert's assertion that this piece and the following duet have only a key relationship is incorrect.¹⁸ At the beginning of the duet Figaro repeats his minuet motif no fewer than six times (a little varied and naturally in a much faster tempo). Significantly, this melodic formula is maintained until the moment that he recognizes Susanna's voice.

The remaining two minuets are middle-class pieces. The second section of Basilio's aria ('In quegli anni') contains but a vague allusion to the dance (without an upbeat, which, however, is added in the reprise); the melody soon gets lost in the orchestral painting of the thunderstorm and probably does not have any specific social meaning. Marcellina's aria, on the other hand, can hardly be misunderstood:

No. 24 (Marcellina)

Tempo di Menuetto



The bourgeois character of this minuet is explicit: middle class constitutes the height of Marcellina's social aspirations.

Finally the *fandango* requires an interpretation. Mozart's piece does not answer to the description of this dance in John Moore's epistolary novel 'Mordaunt', published in 1800:

They [i.e. the Spaniards] generally begin by dancing country dances, and finish with the fandango, which is performed in a most indecent manner by the common people, but in a style less reprehensible by the higher ranks. This information I had from the colonel. He introduced me into a large room, where nine or ten couples were dancing the fandango, every couple having a pair of castanets in each hand, which they rattled with great dexterity, and in exact time. The movements of this dance are more lively than graceful; and the dance, upon the whole, is such as a modest English woman would not choose to excel in. Some of the females whom I saw performing on this occasion were of an age which might have made them decline it, independent of any other consideration. Nothing can form a greater contrast than that between the serious and solemn manners of the Spaniards in general and this popular dance. I own it surprised me exceedingly to see, at the house of a woman of character, the sister of a bishop, an exhibition by ladies in respectable situations of life, which would certainly be thought reprehensible by an English bishop, even in opera-dancers.¹⁹

¹⁸ Abert, *op. cit.*, ii, p. 360.

¹⁹ John Moore, 'Mordaunt, Sketches of Life, Characters and Manners in Various Countries; Including the Memoirs of a French Lady of Quality', new ed. by W. L. Renwick (London 1965), p. 60 (Letter no. 12).

Although the *fandango* is described here as a popular dance, it seems rather to be a national dance of popular origin. Moore's description refers to a middle-class circle in a small provincial town near the Portuguese border (Bajados). A performance in a more distinguished gathering might perhaps have shocked him less. In any case, Mozart's *fandango* certainly suggests the "less reprehensible" practice of the higher ranks. The composer borrowed the musical material from Gluck,²⁰ who probably knew the melody directly or indirectly from a Spanish source.²¹ Mozart's dance sounds even more aristocratic than Gluck's, especially in his treatment of the bass, which gives an impression of archaism. The ceremonial character of the piece is easily accounted for by the presence of the Count and the Countess; on the other hand it stresses the disturbance of social order, because it is not the masters who are dancing but their servants. Of particular significance are the poignant dissonances in the inner voices (oboe and bassoon, e.g. bars 142 and 156). They illustrate the underlying tension in a seemingly unclouded atmosphere.

Humanity and Social Engagement

However clearly social tensions are expressed in the opera, they should not lead us to the conclusion that the composer intended to expose the oppression of the lower classes by a ruthless aristocracy. 'Le nozze di Figaro' contains no message; it does not propagate reform of the social order, let alone a revolution. Everyone who uses his eyes and ears must admit that Mozart only registers the social climate, without taking sides. His Count is no monster, nor is Figaro the people's hero. All characters show their weaknesses, at which we tend to smile. On the other hand, the traditional negation of the opera's affinity to contemporary society—illogically based on Mozart's deep humanity—should also be dismissed. It is founded on sentiment rather than on reason. To speak of Mozart's music as timeless is merely an expression of our admiration, since we are unable to imagine an age when people will feel indifferent to it. An obsolete 'Jupiter' symphony, G minor string quintet or 'Nozze di Figaro' is simply inconceivable. But this does not mean that timelessness is a concept fit to be handled by musical scholarship. No piece of music, no drama is without relation to the time in which it was written. While it is true that a work of art creates its own world, still this world will as a matter of course be linked with the world outside, which in the present case is European society of the late eighteenth century.

Does the truth lie midway between these two extremes? I do not think so. It lies on a higher level. The humanity of the characters and the time-bound social tensions are both constituents of the drama, each of them reinforcing and raising the other. What would

²⁰ 'Don Juan' (ballet), no. 19.

²¹ See M. Schneider's article 'Fandango' in *MOG*.

remain of the Count without his tragic social conflict? At his best an amusing *basso buffo*, at his worst a bloodless *parte seria*. On the other hand, how could we believe in the Countess's denial of her rank, had not Mozart given her a viable character? Here lies the essential difference between the opera and its French model. True, Beaumarchais' social engagement is beyond question and his characters are full of life. But they create less tension on the stage, and much wit is needed to keep the public's attention. Mozart discarded most of the Frenchman's *esprit*; he could afford to write the third-act sextet as an understatement. Nevertheless the social tensions are more strongly felt in his music than in Beaumarchais' text; and this is because of his deep insight into human nature.